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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: RELEASE OF IMPRISONED JOURNALIST

Summary

1. (U) Imprisoned opposition journalist Mirza Sakit (Sakit Zahidov) was released from the prison the morning of April 9. Zahidov benefited from an amnesty bill proposed by First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, also a member of parliament, although his release appeared to be complicated by administrative delays, perhaps linked to his public refusal to admit guilt. Zahidov was serving a three-year sentence after he was arrested for narcotics possession June 23, 2006. Observers were essentially unanimous in the belief that the charges were politically motivated. At the time of release, Zahidov had two months left to serve. End summary.

2. (SBU) In a post-release interview to media outlets, Zahidov said, "It is not just a fact I am released. Yes, it is normal to be happy, as I am free now. I am back and free, and will stay the same Mirza Sakit. I will continue writing in the same form and on the same topics starting tomorrow." The journalist and poet will resume his work at "Azadlyg," a leading opposition newspaper which his brother, Ganimat Zahidov, edited prior to his arrest on similarly controversial charges in March 2008. Zahidov said he felt well, but would have a medical examination.

3. (SBU) Comment: The amnesty act of 17 March 2009 freed Sakit from serving the remainder of his prison sentence. However, his release was delayed for unclear reasons during the intervening three weeks, and media observers allege that the delay was due to Sakit's refusal to admit his guilt or thank the authorities, including the First Lady, for his release. In any case, the government's decision to release the journalist is a significant move in the right direction and the first good news on the media front since the presidential election in October 2008. Two other prominent journalists, including Azadlyg's Ganimat Zahidov, remain imprisoned. Another, Asif Marzili, editor of independent weekly "Tezadlar" was sentenced to a one-year prison term for defamation on April 7. Embassy is now seeking to confirm reports that he has been released after the President expressed concern about the case to the media through his advisor Ali Hasanov. (to be reported septel). End comment.